Fine Feathers

Novelized from Eugene Walter's Drama by the same name.

By
WEBSTER DENISON

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SYNOPSIS.

Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds move into their new bungalow—$500 down, balance same as rent!—on Staten Island. Dick Meade, newspaper man, cynic, socialist, takes dinner and spends the night. Dick warns Bob against John Brand, Bob's old schoolmate, now a member of "the system," who is expected to call. Brand, Hudson Cement company president, offers Bob $40,000 to use his position as chemist with the United Construction company to cheat the specifications for cement work on the Pecos River dam. Jane overhearing, asks Bob to accept. His refusal, in the face of their poverty, chills her. Brand wiles Jane into a conspiracy to make Bob "earn" the $40,000. He takes her for an auto ride and they are seen by Dick. She receives $100 "conspirator's money" by mail from Brand, and in the sudden change from skimping economies and unpaid bills to ready money loses all sense of true moral values. The clandestine auto rides continue. Jane tries in vain to influence Bob to accept Brand's offer. Dick arrives unusually early on his regular Wednesday visit. On the heels of Bob who arrives unexpectedly, come Mrs. Collins, Jane's chaperon, arrayed for a ride, and Brand, with his auto. The four actors are together on a stage set for tragedy. Jane explains the conspiracy. Bob again refuses to steal the $40,000, and Jane leaves him—for good, unless he reconsiders. Bob buries his conscience and Jane gets her fine feathers. They become social friends of Mr. and Mrs. Brand. Dick disappears from their life. Bob begins to tipple.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Paying the Price.

With all their money and all Mrs. Brand's charm the Brands were not within the inner circle of New York society. Just what the circle is, is hard to say. Those who try to define it are generally those who know little about it, or who at least are not part of it. The circle is composed of many segments. There are times when these segments vie with others so that it is difficult to tell where the one begins and the other ends. But the boundaries are there, and, generally speaking, they may be determined by the horizontal and vertical lines. New York has grown vertically; its skyscrapers stand as monuments to millions, but from the Battery to the Bronx it measures the same number of feet and inches as in the day of Peter Stuyvesant, and it is the landholders of New York that dominate the circle. Within its circumference there have been many encroachments. Savants are welcomed, toasted and forgotten. Marriage and intermarriage have brought many newcomers; millionaires and billionaires have been tolerated, but the oligarchy remains.

The Brands had neither antecedents nor matrimony as passports. Brand's wife had beauty, culture, wealth; all the reciprocal means that society loves, but she lacked incentive and ambition. Her nearest approach to the inner circle was the Long Island hunting set. She was an ardent horsewoman and rode and drove admirably. She had been received by some very smart people of the younger set in the hunts at Hempstead and Meadowbrook and if she had pursued these acquaintances, might have found an entering wedge to the sacred sphere. But the Brands lived on Little Rock Bay and it was something of a hardship for Mrs. Brand to shift her mounts from her stable half way across the island. An ambitious woman would not let such a little matter as that stand in the way of social preferment, but she found the effort irksome. She entered a few of her favorites in the horse show, but more from pride for her horses than in social quest. In fact, Mrs. Brand was not society mad. She courted comfort and liked her own amusements.

When Jane came upon the scene the situation changed. What Mrs. Brand lacked in way of aspirations, Jane supplied, and what young Mrs. Reynolds lacked in matter of means was amply furnished by her new friend. And Jane wanted all or nothing. She craved not only entree to the circle, but admittance to its most sacred confines. She urged Mrs. Brand to seek every possible avenue of approach to social recognition and influenced her to attempt lavish entertainments. Brand was agreeable enough. He rather enjoyed the energy and zeal that Mrs. Reynolds displayed and approved of the effect it had on his wife. He assisted with a supply of unlimited cash. Jane's only sesame to her goal was through her friend and by the means of her own personal attraction. She made the most of the latter and the bills from her modiste and milliner caused Bob many a misgiving, despite the abandon with which he made and spent his money. He liked to see his wife look as good as the best and he plunged harder and deeper so that he could gratify her every wish without the semblance of question. Economy was a word that he had banished forever and if their house had permitted it he would have urged her to attempt some of the prodigious affairs that she shared at the Brands.

Yet while Reynolds indulged and encouraged his wife he found himself often assuming a care free spirit that he did not feel. There came moments when the false glamor of his life palled and he gave way to deepest melancholy. More and more he resorted to the bracing influence of stimulants and a cessation from this practise only accentuated his morbidness.

For a long time he kept the real state of his mind from Jane and the necessity for the deception carried him farther and farther away from her. In this life of wealth and gaiety the words of Brand now came home to him with poignant sting. He was, indeed, on the outside looking in. He saw his wife, through his apostasy, mount higher to the goal of her ambition while he sank lower and lower. The metamorphosis of soul began to take on physical expression. The candor of his expression changed to cunning and craftiness and an inherent frankness of manner gave way to constraint. At the club the change became noticeable. His evenings there were not of the convivial sort as before. He sought only one form of amusement—gambling. He played heavily and lost oftener than he won. His speculations in the street also went awry. Within a year from the date of his ill-gotten prosperity, Reynolds had begun paying the price. He paid heavily and alone.

His thoughts often turned to Dick and the happy hours they had spent in the little bungalow. And Jane had seemed happy, too, for the reporter's boyish nature and lovable ways had endeared him to both. Reynolds forgot all the difficulties of their life across the bay and dated every element of discontent and unrest from the time of Brand's coming. Brand's coming—the thought of it made the blood surge through his veins—he cursed the day that he had ever made the millionaire's acquaintance and the day it had been renewed; and he cursed Brand himself. What had Brand ever done or intended to do for him? He had used him as a pawn in the game of spoil! A cat's-paw to drag a chestnut from the flame, and then he had thrown him the shell. And for such little gain [illegible] had suffered an incomparable loss. He was burned and seared forever. In the bitterness of these moments Reynolds' very soul was racked and torn and in his heart, at times, there was murder.

He wondered what Dick knew of his actual deal with Brand. He longed sometimes to look up the reporter and bare the whole story. But confession to another would do no good now; it would not repay the municipality he had robbed and it would not renew the bond of friendship with the man he had cast aside.

When Reynolds rushed after his wife that night he stopped for Dick at the little place of cheer on the corner. He almost dragged his friend away, and while they waited for the car he told his intention. He was going from Jane to Brand, he said, and what Brand wanted of him he would do. He was done with poverty and done with principle. He was going to put his hand in the grab bag and take one draw at the game. If that was the way it was played; if that was the only way he could decently clothe his wife and give her the place she was entitled to, that was the way he would play it. He would have told Dick all then, if he would have listened. But the reporter laid a hand over his mouth and stopped him.

"Don't say any more, Bob," he had warned. "If that is the way you feel; if your mind is made up, I don't want to hear any more. I know too much now. But I can forget. Let it go at that. You know you can trust me. Only, remember this: You'll fall flat. There are some men who can't go wrong and get away with it; the wrong always gets away with them."

That was about the last word he had had from Dick. They had ridden up to the city together, but they had conversed but little and at the Battery the reporter shook his friend's hand and hurried away.

Dick was a dreamer; yes. But on the basic principles of life Dick was right, and he had proved a good prophet.

The sting of conscience and remorse began to take such a hold on Bob that he ceased to share his wife's pleasures and he found himself aggrieved and annoyed at her extravagances. The sight of her costly gowns actually irritated him, for he continued to lose heavily and his entire fortune now was less than the forty thousand dollars with which Brand had rewarded his duplicity. It was not his losses, however, that unnerved him. It was the thought that he now had nothing of his own making and that for every luxury his wife enjoyed, he and she were bounden to Brand. Jane was oblivious to it, but that only aggravated the ill. He avoided her. Night after night he remained away, urging press of business while he was engaged in nothing more urgent than some game of chance which for him had lost even the element of sociability. His sleeping hours were as troubled as his wakeful ones and pleading extreme nervousness to Jane, he advised that they occupy separate rooms.

He dreamed constantly of Dick and the bungalow and of his earlier days with Jane. And once he dreamed of something else. He awoke clutching at the clothes, with beads of cold sweat starting from his brow and the picture of a horrible nightmare still before his eyes. He had dreamed that the dam had collapsed and that hundreds of persons were dead, martyrs to his crime. And while he dreamed these dreams Brand slept peacefully. One was a conscience-prodded transgressor and the other a self-satisfied progressive.

At last Bob decided on an escape. He determined to risk everything he had, house and all, in a final coup. If he won, he would go away whether Jane went or not. He could give her enough to be comfortable on if he were successful, and if he lost—well, there would, at least, be a change.

CHAPTER XIX.

Unto Him That Hath.

Mr. Richard Meade it was now—not Dick. If Reynolds had followed the activities of the times he would have seen his friend's signature over articles of import in an enterprising weekly. For the reporter had abandoned his newspaper work and joined the staff of a powerful publication. He was a valued man, a "muck-raker" and crops were fine.

If a year had wrought so much to the detriment of Bob, it had been, on the other hand, equally beneficent to Dick. In the clearness of eye, directness of manner and quiet reserve, one read accomplishment of purpose. Dick was a success, and the reward of success was manifest in his outward appearance, and his environment. He sat at a desk as big as Brand's in a suite as finely furnished and as richly carpeted. He looked out upon a busy thoroughfare, one of the cross streets in New York's colony of publishing houses. He inspected the passing throng, not with a restless spirit of inquiry and conjecture, but with calm observance and quiet analysis. Dick was still a socialist, but a socialist of deeds, not words. [illegible] simply the [illegible] on the en[illegible] from [illegible] to take more credit unto himself and his kind. In this respect he had outdistanced his employers and his writings attracted serious attention from the men who think.

When Dick thought of Bob and his venal surrender to Brand he did not scoff at his friend or rail at his traducer. He pitied Reynolds, not only for what he had done but for what he was—a palpable victim of the system's way. And the very worst kind of a victim, for at first the system had merely stolen a part of the man's earning power and now it had stolen the man himself. The reporter knew beyond a doubt that the false premises on which Bob had founded his new prosperity presaged only one thing—collapse. And unlike Reynolds, he had not simply wondered and dreamed. He had watched. He had kept himself informed about Bob, ready when the inevitable should come, to extend the needed aid.

Dick rose now, put on a well fitting tweed coat and walked leisurely over to the subway. He got off at Wall street and made his way to the offices of a prominent broker. He gave his card to one of the clerks and in a moment was shown into the private sanctum of the firm's head.

"Hello, Meade," the broker greeted. "You look prosperous. What can I do for you, business?"

The young writer smiled and twirled his stick.

"No," he replied, "I guess you've had about enough for one day. Broke pretty good for you, didn't it?"

"In amount of trade, yes. That's the only way it ever breaks good for us. Commissions are all we ask, Meade. Never speculate."

The broker pressed his lips firmly together as if he feared they might part and curl into a treacherous grin.

"Tut, tut," his caller cautioned, "you might make it seldom, to say the least." But he changed his bantering tone to one of sharp businesslike inflection.

"Henning," he said, "time is money to you and to me, too. I know something and I want to know a little more. Bob Reynolds speculates through your house. There was an awful slump in Consolidated Wire today. How badly was he stung on it?"

"Why, that's confidential, Meade. You don't expect me to tell my customers' business to everyone who inquires about it?"

Dick got up and walked over to the broker. He commanded attention this time in such a way that Henning was unable to evade his look.

"Don't quibble with me, Henning," he counseled. "You know that my inquiries into Reynolds' business aren't calculated to do him harm. I have heard something which makes me think he was caught pretty bad today. Now it's yes, or no. If you don't want to enlighten me, say so. Don't stall."

"That means," said the broker, "if I don't answer that you'll find out somewhere else. Well, then, he was hit a plenty. About forty thousand, and if I know anything about Mr. Reynolds' affairs, he was cleaned."

"All on one stock?" Meade asked.

"One was enough," replied the broker. "Consolidated Wire did the trick."

"Quite an unexpected drop, wasn't it?" the young journalist commented. "Oh, by the way," he added lightly, "Mr. Brand, of the Hudson company, has been trading in Consolidated. I suppose he took a tumble, too."

Henning laughed outright.

"Yes, he took a tumble all right, but he took it first—before the drop—and sold. Stocks go up on a rising market," he said placidly. "They go so far and then they usually go down."

"And very reasonable of them, too." Dick feigned no surprise at Brand's good fortune. He got up and walked about the room, inspecting, in turn, the mural decorations. Then quite casually he fingered a pad of paper on the broker's desk and toyed with a convenient pencil. Unwittingly he drew some little lines on the paper, two vertical, and across them, two horizontal ones. Then he drew them again—a double cross.

Henning, a keen observer of this artistic trifling, reddened slightly, but his immobile features underwent no change. He watched the writer reach for his hat and neither spoke. As Dick opened the door the broker offered no commonplace good-by. His words might have seemed somewhat irrelevant, but for the little cross Dick had scratched upon the pad.

"Meade," he said, without rising, "you're wasting your time at that magazine stuff. Why don't you come down here and get in with the live ones? You could make your fortune in the street beyond a doubt."

"Thanks," answered the journalist complacently. "Coming from you that's quite a compliment. But even a broker can't ignore some truths. If you don't mind I'll give you a motto for Wall street. 'Unto him that hath shall be given and from him that hath not shall be taken even more than he hath.' A slight revision of the original text but for the purpose a just one. Good-by, Henning."

"Wait," [illegible]

Dick turned.

"Wait. I didn't know Reynolds was such a friend of yours. Maybe he isn't flat. Maybe we can fix him up a bit."

"I'm afraid not," Dick answered. "From what I knew and from what I've learned now, I fear he's past fixing."

He went out into the crowd. It was four o'clock. Wall and Broad streets were filled with a hurrying, scurrying throng.

Dick, in no mood for haste, was shoved and jostled, as he hugged the sides of buildings in his more leisurely progress toward the subway. When he saw the mobs pouring down into the tube at Wall and at Dey streets he wormed his way northward along Broadway till he found a taxi and headed for the Thirty-fourth street ferry.

The boat made its slip at Long Island City and he caught a train for Bayside where the Reynolds lived. Where they lived, but would live no more. Poor Bob! he thought, and poor Jane! For his heart went out to Jane as much as to his friend. She was but a girl, blinded by the glamor with which the trap had been baited and Bob was a man who had stepped boldly into it.

The end had come quicker than Dick thought it would. It was but a matter of time, he knew, but he would have given Bob more than a year.

He learned that the Reynolds' house was some thirty minutes walk from the station. He could find no means of conveyance, so he set out on foot.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A Century Ago.

One hundred years ago the American privateer General Armstrong, in command of Capt. Guy R. Champlin, arrived at New York after a cruise of four months, in the course of which she had captured 11 British vessels. Only the day previous to her arrival in New York, while off Sandy Hook, she had captured the sloop Henrietta, laden with stores for the British fleet in Chesapeake bay. The General Armstrong was perhaps the foremost of all the fighting privateers engaged in the second war with Great Britain. She was armed with nine large guns and carried a crew of 90 men. Early in her career, while cruising off the coast of South America, she battled for more than an hour with a British man-of-war carrying 27 guns, and then made good her escape from her more powerful adversary.

Overcome.

"Now that you have heard my daughter sing, professor, what do you think of her voice?"

"Tomorrow, madam, I vill tell you. Today—ach gott!—it iss imbossible."

TEMPERANCE NOTES

(Conducted by the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union.)

DOCTORS HAVE NEW LIGHT.

A common argument of the liquor interests may be put in the form of a syllogism thus:

Major premise: The demand for an occasional stimulant is instinctive in human nature. Minor premise: Alcohol is a stimulant. Conclusion: Alcoholic drinks supply a natural demand.

Granting the first premise to be sound—which we do not grant—the second premise is glaringly untrue. Latest findings of medical science have proved that alcohol is not a stimulant as once believed, but a depressant. There is expert testimony in abundance to this effect. We quote here from W. A. Chapple, M. D., M. R. C. S., Ph. D., and member of parliament:

"We know that alcohol stimulates nothing except disease and the susceptibility to it. We know one of the first nerve centers to fall under its paralyzing influence is the vaso-motor center in the brain. What happens is all you see and a lot you don't see. The face flushes because the vessels dilate and engorge. But you only see it in the face because these vessels are so delicate everywhere—in the brain, the liver, the kidneys, all the vital organs, which suffer in consequence. And the heart beats faster. It beats faster because its controlling mechanism has been paralyzed. It has not been stimulated any more than the horse has been stimulated by cutting its reins. We see, therefore, how, till quite recently, doctors have been deceived. Wine is a mocker! But it need mock no longer. Apply the teaching of experience, of science and of the Bible—all attest that in the end it 'biteth like a serpent and stingeth like an adder.'"

SAVE THE BOYS.

A number of loafers were sitting outside a village store one evening, when a farmer drove up and flashed a state-wide prohibition petition on them, explained what it meant, and asked if any of them wanted to sign it. The farmer knew the [illegible] time boozers, but he did not propose to pass them by. The oldest man in the bunch promptly said:

"I am down and out. Booze put me to the bad. I am too old to ever get on my feet and make a man of myself. I am going to sign that dry petition, and if I live I will vote dry, for I do not want any one of those little boys (pointing to a group of little fellows playing near by) to become what I am now. I want to do what I can to save the boys."

WHO SHALL DECIDE?

"No class is better acquainted with the dreadful social effects of alcoholism than the medical profession," says the Medical Times, "and we are interested in the sociological phases of the subject hardly less than in the scientific. Therefore, we are interested in the efforts of the prohibitionists to prohibit. Perhaps our alcoholics might well be left to destroy themselves as a matter of personal freedom and of riddance to the community, were it not for the social havoc that flows from the vice. This makes it a concern of government. It is not those who profit commercially from the sale of the poison that should decide the issue, but those whose lives and happiness are in jeopardy."

NO UPHEAVAL IN BUSINESS.

"If the liquor traffic were abolished tomorrow," said Rev. Dr. Boynton of Chicago in a sermon on "Liquor Logic," "the other industries of the country, employing 6,020,000 people, would have to absorb only 6,430 persons who are now engaged in the manufacture of distilled liquors and only 54,579 who are now engaged in the manufacture of fermented liquors. This change in the business world would be less of a shock to the business of the United States than was the inauguration of the parcel post or the changes that are usually required by every revision of the tariff."

LIGHTENS FARMERS' TAXES.

(By PROF. JOHN A. NICHOLS.)

The suppression of the liquor traffic would be of great benefit to the farmers, who are now taxed heavily to pay their part of the enormous expense of taking care of the great army of orphans and paupers, drunkards, and criminals produced by this destructive and degrading traffic. The liquor traffic now destroys the buying capacity of the men who put their money into whisky and beer. For every $100 spent for liquor, the farmer now receives $5.50. If the money was spent for other commodities the farmers' share would be very largely increased.